

PRESS RELEASE: Sunday 21 May 2023

Battle stations over Norfolk's unauthorised bridge infill

The future of a historic railway bridge should be known within weeks after National Highways submitted a retrospective planning application for what campaigners describe as the structure's "destructive burial".

St Andrew's Lane bridge at Congham, Norfolk was infilled by the state-owned roads company in the spring of 2021, 17 months after telling the Borough Council of King's Lynn and West Norfolk that the project would be carried out under permitted development rights intended for immediate, temporary works in emergency situations. Costing £127K, it's estimated to have involved more than a thousand tonnes of stone and concrete.

In October 2019, consultants informed planning officers that the structure's 'edge girders' - holding up the parapets - only had a capacity of 7.5 tonnes, but didn't mention the girders supporting the actual carriageway which had been assessed as having a 40-tonne capacity in 2003. No evidence of an emergency was provided.

St Andrew's Lane is narrow, with overhanging trees and a bend at the bridge's west end. Traffic levels are light, although it is used by some agricultural vehicles.

To comply with its obligations under permitted development rights known as 'Class Q', National Highways should have asked the council for written consent if it wanted to keep the infill longer than 12 months. Its failure to do so resulted in the scheme becoming unauthorised and the council's request that retrospective planning permission should be sought.

Graeme Bickerdike, a member of The HRE Group of engineers, greenway developers and heritage campaigners, said: "The bridge had defects typical of most legacy structures and presented only modest risks given the prevailing circumstances. The action taken by National Highways was characteristically disproportionate.

"They infilled the structure for routine asset management purposes, but chose to exploit rights that apply to urgent, short-term interventions. The scheme was part of a programme of more than a hundred bridge infills, with almost one-third of them being proposed under these misapplied emergency rights. Some of the structures had no meaningful defects."

Dating from 1926, St Andrew's Lane bridge was the most elaborate of six built using an innovative system of modular concrete components developed by William Marriott, engineer of the Midland & Great Northern Joint Railway. It featured curved wingwalls and attractive blockwork. Only two of the six structures survive following the infilling.

"The historical significance of the bridge wasn't considered by National Highways when it decided to undertake this destructive burial", said Graeme Bickerdike. "Nor did it take into

account the unwelcome environmental impacts of transporting a large amount of quarried material and placing it in a rural landscape, or the structure's potential to play a useful role as we transition to a greener future.

"In its planning application, National Highways claims the infill 'barely alters...the perception and enjoyment of the bridge' which is now 'preserved within the infilling for posterity'. This demonstrates just how clueless they are when it comes to heritage; they simply do not understand their responsibilities as custodians of legacy assets."

Campaigners have urged anyone interested in railways, social history or active travel to object to the application. Details can be found on the Borough Council of King's Lynn and West Norfolk's planning portal, searching for application number 23/00894/F. Comments and objections can be submitted via the same website.

The infill scheme at Congham was one of five involving breaches of Class Q rights by National Highways between autumn 2019 and spring 2021. The submission of another retrospective planning application - for a project at Rudgate bridge near Tadcaster, North Yorkshire - is expected in late June.

By 11 October, a disused railway bridge at Great Musgrave in Cumbria must be unearthed after councillors rejected a retrospective planning application for its infilling. The scheme was pursued under Class Q rights after National Highways' engineer rejected Eden District Council's request not to start the work.

--ENDS--

Attachments

ConghamAerial©TheHREGroup: An aerial view showing the bridge and route of the old railway to its north-east. (Credit: The HRE Group)

ConghamBridgeAfter©TheHREGroup: The structure was infilled with aggregate and concrete between 22 March 2021 and 30 April 2021. (Credit: The HRE Group)

ConghamRoad©TheHREGroup: The bridge carries a narrow and little-used country lane. (Credit: The HRE Group)

ConghamBridgeBefore©RichardHumphrey: A view of the bridge prior to National Highways carrying out its infill scheme. (Credit: Richard Humphrey)

ConghamBridgeArchive©M&GNTrust: An archive photograph showing the bridge shortly after its construction. (Credit: M&GN Trust)

(Higher resolution versions of the above photographs are available on request)

SupportingDocuments (PDF): The consultants' letter to the Borough Council of King's Lynn & West Norfolk on 6 October 2020; Class Q emergency development rights; planners' email

about Rudgate bridge planning application; email from NH's engineer to Eden District Council about Great Musgrave bridge.

The 2003 assessment of Congham bridge's capacity is available via this link.

https://hre.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/pmy2_76_Congham+Road_7.5+tonnes.pdf

The planning application documents are available via this link.

<https://online.west-norfolk.gov.uk/online-applications/applicationDetails.do?activeTab=makeComment&keyVal=RUUVN4IV0JA00>

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Notes for editors

The Historical Railways Estate (HRE) is owned by the Department for Transport (DfT) and managed on its behalf by National Highways (NH). NH is responsible for inspecting, maintaining and limiting the liability associated with around 3,100 disused railway bridges, abutments, tunnels, culverts and viaducts.

Although transport policy is largely a matter for the devolved administrations, around 19% of the HRE structures are in Scotland and 11% in Wales. These remain under NH's management.

National Highways operates under a Protocol Agreement with the Department for Transport which sets out its obligations in relation to the safety, inspection, maintenance, disposal of the structures, the maximisation of rental income and reduction of risk. Its remit was formerly fulfilled by BRB (Residuary) until its abolition on 30 September 2013.

Since assuming responsibility for the HRE, NH has infilled 51 bridges at a cost of £8.01M. The programme was paused by the government in July 2021. A map showing the infilled structures, together with the cost of each scheme, is available via this link...

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/1/edit?mid=1owQSnow1Yj5taYxkzBybTFvnHyxlwWc>

In 2020, National Highways awarded framework contracts to six companies for works on HRE structures with a headline value of £254M over seven years. It also agreed a professional services contract with Jacobs, worth £31.9M over ten years, and two contracts for inspections/examinations with a value of £18M over ten years.

In January 2021, it was revealed that 134 structures were at risk of demolition or infilling. These were located in East Anglia (12), East Midlands (4), London and the Home Counties (8),

Northern England (16), Northern Scotland (8), North-West England (3), South-East England (11), Central/Southern Scotland (19), South-West England (24), Wales (5), West Midlands (16) and Yorkshire & Lincolnshire (8).

National Highways now claims that the threat of infill or demolition has been lifted from all these structures and any future major works will be the subject of review and consultation with its Stakeholder Advisory Forum, established in October 2021.

A map showing the broader threat to HRE structures - including those that have failed assessments - is available via this link...

https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/edit?mid=1LVvKXUS_a66LGzG8mPNLZaRpz2hw3ioe

The HRE Group is an alliance of walking, cycling and heritage campaigners, engineers and greenway developers who regard the Historical Railways Estate's structures to be strategically valuable in the context of future rail and active travel provision.

The following local authorities have told National Highways that planning permission is required for bridge infilling schemes: Aberdeenshire, Angus, Cheshire West & Chester, Essex, Glasgow, Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, Hertfordshire, Leicestershire, North Ayrshire, North Yorkshire, Northumberland, Perth & Kinross, Powys, Shropshire and Stratford-upon-Avon. Others have raised objections or imposed specific constraints.